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AUTHOR Durfee, Linda J.
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ABSTRACT

When DIALOG introduced DIALMAIL, its electronic mail service, online searchers were encouraged to use it as an alternative delivery method for offline prints. The new method of retrieval was considered to be fast and described in documentation and reviews as being much less expensive than online types. Performed in June 1987, this study compares the cost of retrieving online types in three DIALOG files to the cost of retrieving the same records offline using DIALMAIL. Using an IBM-PC with random access memory and an on-board Hayes Smartmodem 1200B, Smartcom II, and a Legend 1380 dot matrix printer, sample searches were conducted on ONTAP ERIC, ONTAP PsycINFO, and ONTAP MEDLINE, which are commonly searched online and which represent a range of price schedules. The PsycINFO retrieval via DIALMAIL indicated a 52% savings over DIALOG; however, retrieving ERIC and MEDLINE data via DIALMAIL costs slightly more than the online source. Overall, it is concluded that prints are not consistently less expensive than online types, and searchers are cautioned to do similar cost comparisons for the databases they use most often. (SD)

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OFFLINE PRINTS VIA DIALMAIL: THEY AIN'T NECESSARILY CHEAP

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by Linda J. Durfee
Assistant Librarian, Reference Services
Wessell Library, Tufts University

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When DIALOG introduced DIALMAIL, its electronic mail service, online searchers were encouraged to use it as an alternate delivery method for offline prints. The new method of retrieval was fast and, furthermore, touted by documentation and reviews to be much less expensive than online types. The following study, done in June 1987, compares the cost of retrieving online types in three DIALOG files to the cost of retrieving the same records offline via DIALMAIL. Results show that DIALMAIL prints are not consistently less expensive than online types and searchers are cautioned to do similar cost comparisons for the databases they use most often.

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, at a DIALOG "Sampler" addressing DIALOG's new electronic mail service, DIALMAIL, and its applications, there were oohs and ahs from the floor as we learned that DIALMAIL can be used as an alternate delivery method for offline prints. Charges are the same as for regular offline prints (delivered via U.S. mail), but prints are delivered overnight to the searcher's electronic "mailbox," to be retrieved the next morning at only $12 per connect hour. "Gee, that's neat," someone said. It is neat, but is it necessarily less expensive than online types?

According to Ran Hock at DIALOG's Boston office, DIALOG has done no cost comparison of the two methods other than a rudimentary analysis at 300 baud. He points out that a comparison would be

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complicated because of varying price schedules and record lengths among databases. Nevertheless, ordering prints via DIALMAIL is gaining popularity, which he considers to be an indication that searchers find it economical in general.

I instead suspect that DIALMAIL delivery of offline prints has become popular simply because it is something new and because searchers have been led to believe that it is less expensive than ordering online types.

REVIEWS CAN BE MISLEADING

In a review of DIALMAIL in the May 1987 Online, Monica Ertel and Norman Kline advise searchers faced with a large set that would "cost a small fortune to print online or send to disk" that they now have the option to print the search offline via DIALMAIL and "pick it up tomorrow morning at a greatly reduced price." [1, p.48] They outline the procedure of ordering prints via DIALMAIL in a subsequent example, although unfortunately it contains a number of discrepancies and/or typographical errors. "The next morning we logon to DIALMAIL and find our search results waiting for us to download at $12 an hour as opposed to the $65 or $90 or higher per hour cost if we had downloaded it the day before." [1, p.52]

Aside from showing the $11 estimated cost for printing 20 full format records offline in file 275, however, they make no further mention of cost. Retrieval via DIALMAIL is $12 per connect hour

plus telecommunication charges (add another $8 an hour for DialNet). Assuming it takes approximately .004 hours to type one full record at 1200 baud in this file, I would estimate additional DIALMAIL charges of $1.60, for a total of $12.60, versus an estimated $18.32 total for online types. This is indeed a savings, but nowhere near as dramatic as Ertel and Kline imply!

ESTIMATED COST COMPARISON

What about other files? What about ERIC, for instance, an inexpensive database, which charges only 10¢ for full format types, but 14¢ for prints?

Using an IBM-PC with 512 random access memory and an on-board Hayes Smartmodem 1200B, Smartcom II, and a Legend 1380 dot matrix printer with a printing speed of 160 CPS and 2K RAM buffer, I took advantage of some free online time to gather data in files 201 (ONTAP ERIC), 212 (ONTAP PsycINFO) and 254 (ONTAP MEDLINE) to use for cost estimates. I chose these files because their counterparts are files which I search regularly. Furthermore, ERIC, PycINFO, and MEDLINE represent a variety of price schedules.

In each of the files, I did a simple search (select self concept) and created a set from which to type some sample records. In ONTAP PsycINFO I eliminated dissertations (NOT JN=DISS?), which have no abstract, and in ONTAP ERIC I sorted records by author, thus interspersing the longer ED records among the EJ records which

otherwise appear first. This imposed an artificial uniformity on the sets but made it easier to regard them as "average" sets of records. After creating the set I did a "logoff hold," logged on again to "type" records 1-25 in format 7 (a format I frequently use), and logged off once more as soon as the DIALOG prompt appeared. The logoff message thus indicated connect time required to type 25 records in this format.

I used these connect time figures to estimate the cost of typing a set of 25 format 7 records in files 1, 11 and 154, and of ordering the same information offline via DIALMAIL. For example, it took .081 hours to type such a set in ONTAP ERIC. Given that rates in ERIC (file 1) are $30 an hour (plus $8 an hour for DialNet), 14¢ per print and 10¢ per type in format 7, and assuming it also takes .081 hours to type a similar set in ERIC, or to retrieve it via DIALMAIL, the costs would be:

online types	.081 (30 + 8) + 25 (.10) = $5.58
prints via DIALMAIL	.081 (12 + 8) + 25 (.14) = $5.12

Not much to get excited about. However, using the same method of estimation for the other two files reveals a cost of $14.99 online and $6.98 via DIALMAIL in PsycINFO (file 11) and of $3.54 online and $6.04 via DIALMAIL in MEDLINE (file 154). These figures are a little more interesting. So much for estimation; let's move on to actual costs.

ACTUAL COSTS IN THREE FILES

In each of the three files, I ordered 25 records in format 7 offline via DIALMAIL. (For simplicity and since the concern is retrieval cost, the minimal connect time and telecommunication costs to select a set and order the transaction are not covered here. As with the cost estimates, dissertations were eliminated in PsycINFO and the ERIC records were sorted by author.) The logoff message included the statement:

```
$5.00  25 Prints in Format  7
```

for both files 11 and 154 (25 x 20¢). The charge was $3.50 in file 1 (25 x 15¢).

The next day I retrieved my DIALMAIL message from file 1. Upon exit, the message read:

```
$1.10   0.092hrs DIALMAIL
$0.74   0.092hrs DialNet
```

Total DIALMAIL retrieval charges, including charges to interact with the DIALMAIL system, were thus $5.34.

I then immediately retrieved the same set in the form of online types in file 1--time of day and, consequently, online response time were therefore more or less constant for both DIALMAIL and DIALOG retrieval. (Again, because the concern is retrieval cost, I followed the same procedure after creating a

set--logoff hold, log on and type, logoff--as for the cost estimate.) At the second logoff, the message read:

```
$1.77    0.059 Hrs File1
$2.50  25 Types in Format  7
$2.50  25 Types
$0.47  Dialnet
$4.74  Estimated cost this file
```

Similarly, I read my DIALMAIL messages, one at a time, from files 11 and 154, and typed the same set online in DIALOG immediately after retrieving it via DIALMAIL. The following table shows actual DIALOG and DIALMAIL costs and connect times for all three files.

ACTUAL COST TO RETRIEVE 25 RECORDS
ONLINE TYPES VS. OFFLINE PRINTS VIA DIALMAIL

	ERIC (file 1)	PsycInfo (file 11)	Medline (file 154)
prints via DIALMAIL	$ 5.34	$ 7.16	$ 6.97
print charges	3.50	5.00	5.00
other charges	1.84	2.16	1.97
connect time	0.092 hrs	0.108 hrs	0.099 hrs
online types	$ 4.74	$14.92	$ 5.02
type charges	2.50	8.75	1.25
other charges	2.24	6.17	3.77
connect time	0.059 hrs	0.098 hrs	0.085 hrs

Surprise! Not only did I have to wait until the day after I did the search to get my information, but it cost slightly more to retrieve the ERIC and MEDLINE data via DIALMAIL. On the other hand, for many people the 52% savings in PsycINFO would be worth the wait.

For each set of records the connect time was slightly longer in DIALMAIL than in DIALOG, most likely thanks to the necessary interaction with the DIALMAIL program. A frequent user of the system might alter his DIALMAIL profile to get short menus and would probably stack commands to bypass a step or two, thus saving some time. Downloading, for either retrieval method, would also lower connect time, although for as few as 25 records the difference would probably be negligible.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, offline prints delivered via DIALMAIL are not consistently less expensive than records typed online in DIALOG. Comparisons among other databases are likely to reveal similar cost discrepancies. Since there is no simple rule of thumb, searchers would be well advised to do their own cost investigation for the databases they search most often.

REFERENCE

1. Ertel, Monica, and Kline, Norman. "Electronic Mail for the Online Professional: A Review of DIALMAIL." Online 11 (March, 1987): 48-54.